

Déjà Vu “50”

As a survivor of a student overseas trip sponsored by DePauw in 1964, I was intrigued to be involved in another such trip in 2014, spanning a generational abyss of 50 years.

In the summer of 1964 a flock of 26 fortunate students departed on “Wandering with Winsey,” a “Grand Tour” of Europe escorted by the Art Department Chair. We spent five days on an ocean liner getting little sleep, playing bridge, and celebrating nightly with innocent boisterousness (Pot was not yet part of our vocabulary). Thereafter our days were spent in cathedrals or museums and our evenings helping our soused trip leader find his way back to chic hotels. We met many Americans, Canadians, and a few Europeans. Our goals were to experience the ample European culture, enlarge our perspectives, pick up some sophistication, and get good grades in Art History. We carried things like hand soap and chocolate to give away to the less fortunate and we felt good about that. We ate things we had never put in our mouths before. We were frequently late to the bus. There were trysts inside and outside the tour group. We kept our notes and drawings in paper notebooks. Most Europeans spoke English but none of us spoke their languages. Some of the group became life long friends and even married.

In 1964 we all knew EXACTLY where we were when we heard John F. Kennedy had died short months before, the Berlin Wall was a hotbed of East German homicide, the Beatles invaded America via the Ed Sullivan show, and Stanley Kubrick launched “Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb.” Yes, some people had bomb shelters. Golding’s Lord of the Flies and J.D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye were required reading for socially conscious folks. The Supreme Court upheld “One Man, One Vote.” Negroes held freedom marches. Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment. The Gulf of Tonkin incident played out in Nam during our trip, and we were draftable.

International anxiety reigned. The United States was the most opulent society in the history of the world, but was viewed as ineffective in finding solutions to family slums, prejudice, and the “Red Menace.” Most of us believed in the “America-first” bandwagon, hardly embracing the idea that we were citizens of the world. We were the tail end of the “Silent Generation” and the vanguard of the “Boomers.” Our parents, the “Greatest Generation,” had saved the world. What was left for us?

Our long-term personal goals could have been nebulously stated, “to be important.” None of us seemed immediately worried about money, power, or titles. About to be a senior, I was “considering” med school, though it was the most competitive of post-graduate pursuits. If rejected, I was confident I could go on in chemistry or Law. Others in our group were even less focused. We positioned ourselves for life by momentum. We believed that DePauw had taught us not to know everything, but how to figure things out. We were prepared for any life path with that blithe confidence DePauw had instilled.

In 2014 our realities are shaped by the fear of Terrorism. Using politically correct-speak, we witness undocumented aliens and LGBT’s challenge the status quo. Energy and

water are scarce commodities. Single parent families dominate slums. Hanna Montana morphed into a twerking Myley Cyrus, while Rap lyrics and Lady Gaga define brashness. Mandela died a beloved past-president. Youth can no longer depend on Uncle Sam, with Social Security and governmental debt not fixable.

“Millennials,” or “Me Gens” are predicted to become more civic and internationally minded even though narcissistic and unused to reprimands.

When I exited into the Atlanta Hartsfield Airport, gaily colored tee shirts announced to all that the DePauw Winter Term in Service was there, on the way to Ecuador. “Where,” I asked, “was the leader?” Several pointed to a young lady, who looked up, nodded, and resumed busily pecking away at her smart phone. Most were adorned with ear buds, guarding their hand luggage. Several introduced themselves to the “old doc” and went back to pecking. What kind of automatons was I joining?

But when we got off the plane in Quito, no more electronic gizmos were in evidence – for two weeks. Large bags were commandeered. The bus dropped us to sleep in a decrepit but clean hostel. The next morning we proceeded to our permanent camp on the Napo River with a two-week mission to provide basic health care to surrounding Kichwa villages. The housing was spartan by any standards, with occasionally gas-generated electricity. We slept in squeaky bunk beds, with cold-water showers (or the river), with insects (no-seeums cause red dotted legs), and frequent rain, daily lugging heavy equipment over riverbanks and roads of sloppy mud. Our brigade consisted of twenty-three students, three alumni professionals, some local professionals, a few faculty, the Timmy Global folks and some Ecuadorean translators.

Timmy Global Healthcare, in Indianapolis, was the project manager. Having a permanent presence in Ecuador, Timmy Global gathers supplies and coordinates scheduled visits to villages utilizing local village leaders, buses, boats, and stateside student planning. Its principal goals in Ecuador are public health efforts to improve the drinking water supply and sanitary disposal in the indigenous villages. The goals of our brigade were to provide continuity of primary medical and dental care, give first aid, offer nutritional advice, as well as identify and triage more complex medical problems to specialty referral facilities, paid for by Timmy. This required an orchestrated team effort, each player playing his/her part, chipping in with grunt work as well as talent. Timmy deserves the support of everyone who believe that philanthropy can provide efficient benefits to underserved populations. Tammy Truong, an amazing ball of perpetual motion, led the Ecuadorian effort. Tammy exemplifies the selfless dedication and infectious enthusiasm that take Timmy to the top of the pack.

DePauw’s young men and women were who truly fascinated me. Some tasted insects, some roasted worms, all ate fruits and plants with unpronounceable names, without protest. I expected loose ends, but there were none. I expected late bus starts, but there were none. I expected trivial illnesses and excuses, but there were none. I expected late night carousing, but there was none. I expected dismay with lodging or food or muggy rain, but no one griped, EVER. To a person, they were thrilled to make a difference by

carrying out their mission. I was constantly being asked, how was I feeling, how did I sleep, how was my meal – could these students be this considerate? Always, offers of “let me help,” “I’ll do it,” “anything else to carry?” Limitless energy propelled them through daily treks and nightly “shared reflections,” to after-dinner Latin dance lesson revelry till bedtime, and up, on time, ready to go.

How honed are their ambitions? They were not merely interested in medicine, but medical Law, Environmental Medicine, Pediatric Surgery, Holistic Medicine, Physician’s Assistant in Orthopedics, and so on. These students have realistic long-term goals and they are laser-focused on getting there. This mission was precisely planned and pulled off without a hitch, despite obstacles posed by meddling Mother Nature. The troops made time each day to play with the children, while assiduously performing their duties. Engaging the culture, many students, fluent in Spanish (better than my clumsy hospital Mexican) befriended the locals, their children, and our camp workers. Altruism is alive.

Sure, I came to help out with the mission, but I also came to see if today’s DePauw students were made of the “right stuff” and I was very, very happy.

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